



ORGANIZATION AND COMMAND AND CONTROL

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Effective [counterair](#) operations require a reliable command and control (C2) capability. C2 assets should be capable of exchanging information rapidly with other Services, components, and multinational partners. The information flow supports the chain of command and should be as complete, secure, and near real time as possible.

Centralized control and decentralized execution remain a fundamental tenet of [airpower](#); advances in technology have not changed this. C2 systems are tailored to support this tenet. Centralized control is exercised from the appropriate command level while permitting decentralized execution of counterair operations. Decentralized execution means that the lowest echelon possible is given responsibility for determination of mission requirements and achievement of mission success. The capabilities of modern communication and near- realtime display technologies, however, make centralized execution—such as direct control of missions from outside the cockpit—possible. During several recent operations, senior commanders have attempted a degree of control approaching centralized execution. *Such command arrangements may not be effective in a fully stressed, dynamic combat environment and so are seldom, if ever, appropriate for counterair operations—especially [offensive counter air](#) (OCA).* The loss of situational awareness and tactical flexibility entailed by centralized execution of counterair missions may often degrade mission effectiveness. Future conflicts involving operations in a contested, degraded, or operationally limited environment further emphasize the importance of centralized control and decentralized execution.



The six months of major combat in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan saw not only centralized planning, but also a degree of centralized execution that was unique in the US experience... [Technology] allowed sensor-to-shooter links to be shortened, in some cases, from hours to minutes. It also, however, resulted in an oversubscribed target-approval process that lengthened rather than compressed the kill chain. As a result, the human factor became the main constraint impeding more effective time-critical targeting...

This unprecedentedly [sic] close connectivity, however, cut both ways. Although it was helpful—and even essential—up to a point, it also often resulted in gridlock, in that it encouraged higher-level leaders and their staffs to try to micromanage the fighting. Senior leaders often intervened at the tactical level not because circumstances required it, but simply because they could. As a result, fast-moving targets sometimes were allowed to get away.

Another consequence of our expanded global connectivity was that 'reach-back,' a desirable capability when used with discrimination, metamorphosed into 'reach-forward' as rear headquarters sought information from US Central Command's forward-deployed combined air and space operations center (CAOC) and then used that information to try to influence events from the rear....

—Benjamin S. Lambeth

by permission, excerpted from *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM*

Nonetheless, the nature of global communication in this day and age virtually guarantees a degree of political sensitivity and operational visibility completely alien to the generation of Airmen who fought before the US involvement in Vietnam. Air Force

forces cannot expect to operate in a completely unconstrained environment. [Rules of engagement](#) (ROE) are “*directives issued by competent military authority that delineate the circumstances and limitations under which United States forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement with other forces encountered*” (JP 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms*). Effective operations require the establishment and promulgation of easily understood ROE. ROE are established to convey the intent and guidance of national leadership and senior military commanders with respect to the use of force. They reflect legal constraints and political imperatives that may impact the operation’s overall end state and may thus place restrictions on use of force, engagement authority, etc. ROE and special instructions constrain (compel) and restrain (prohibit) certain military actions. Though restrictive, these measures do not constitute centralized execution.

Observations from Operation Enduring Freedom:

...the [Predator] images also caused headaches for the commander of regular US forces in Afghanistan who was overseeing the operation. Throughout the battles in the Shah-i-Kot region, command personnel at higher levels, and operating in other locations, relayed numerous questions and much advice to the commander in the field in an attempt to contribute to the management of unfolding battle.



...the episode reveals the powerful influence that live pictures from the battle zone can have on the ability of the on-site commander to determine and execute a successful battle plan. The last thing the US field commanders need is an over-complicated chain of command, with officers thousands of miles away from the scene of battle providing armchair advice on the basis of pictures rolling across a television screen.

— Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: War Fighting, Intelligence, and Force Transformation*

Centralized execution may lengthen the friendly decision cycle and the dynamic targeting process (the “kill chain”), but the sensitivity of certain end-state conditions may require C2 arrangements that approach centralized execution in rare cases. When this happens, operations should revert to centralized control and decentralized execution as soon as practicable.

There has been a tendency for ROE to become more restrictive as the level of hostilities has diminished in the concluding phases of most recent conflicts. This tendency can result in ROE that, in effect, drive operational plans toward centralized execution. The majority of conflicts will involve phases or operations where military expediency will be deemed less important than political considerations. However, such “overly centralized” ROE are contrary to the natural function of air forces. They can lead to a collective mindset whereby Airmen begin to rely on ever-increasing levels of oversight and approval, and eventually become dependent on them to execute. As such, commanders should be careful not to create ROE so restrictive that they place friendly forces at unnecessary risk or at an operational disadvantage.

In any case, while restrictive ROE may exist, centralized execution of counterair operations is much rarer than in the conduct of other operations such as strategic attack or nuclear operations. For example, during Operation SOUTHERN WATCH, there were many restrictions on use of deadly force against Iraqi air defense facilities, but there was very little interference in how individual missions were flown in support of the operation. Airmen at the tactical level had the latitude to execute in a decentralized manner.
